

The Boy in the Bedroom

I hadn't intended to write the scripts for the BBC's version of *The Buddha of Suburbia*. My wish was to hand the book over to someone else, forget about it, and watch the series when it appeared on TV. After all, I'd written and re-written the book, and promoted it in several countries. It was time to move on. Sometimes I wish I were better at doing things I don't really want to do, but it can also be a strength.

The first writer hired to make the adaptation took my text and presented it as Karim's voice-over, with accompanying pictures. I could see the point of the narration, and later, when Roger Michel and I were writing the script, we discussed it constantly and experimented with it. (There are, after all, scores of good films which use a first-person voice over.) In the end, however, it seemed lazy and had a deadening effect, as if the events were not happening in the present. If the serial wasn't to be like watching an illustrated talk, the first-person point of view had to be abandoned. The challenge was to dramatise everything.

The second writer was, apparently, instructed to 'capture the spirit' of the novel. Consequently, opening the script at random, I saw a scene set in a chip shop, featuring characters whose names I didn't recognise, as if this 'spirit' was not necessarily present in the scenes I'd created, of which only a minimum remained.

Directors came and went, having refused to shoot the scripts. Finally, having been informed that at this rate the project would never get made, and being made to feel that my misgivings were obstructing it, I agreed to write it. An office would be provided at the BBC. The latest director, Roger Michel, and I, would collaborate.

I enjoyed packing my briefcase in the morning, buying my newspaper at the tube station on the corner, getting on the bus and going to the office, like other people. It made me feel normal, in what was, for me, a far from normal period.

Only a few months before my father had died; my father, who'd always encouraged me to take up this precarious craft and living, and never suggested I become a doctor, accountant or bus driver, had made me see that someone like me could do something like this, although the odds were not in one's favour. And, once I'd started seriously to do it, he kept me going. Strangely, now I think about it, I never rebelled against this conviction and it remained implacably within me. You would have thought, with such a parent, who burned to be a novelist, and insisted I live the life he craved for himself, the sensible son would, without hesitation, sign up for the Navy. It's possible, however, that my resistance consisted of my including him, parodically, in *The Buddha*; I know he was shocked, but he never complained.

Also during the same period, a film, *London Kills Me*, which somewhat innocently, I'd directed, wanting to see if this was something I might like to learn about, had been roundly abused. Finally, I was sick, waiting to go into hospital for a back operation. I

couldn't stand or even shuffle without thinking a dagger was being turned in my lower back, and electric shocks administered to my legs, all day, perhaps by critics. How much pleasure pain sucks from life, making one weary and dispirited! I was swallowing pills by the handful, imagining that if I took enough the pain would stop for good. However, I had at least made a decision.

For over a year I'd been rolled and thumped and examined naked and robbed blind by numerous osteopaths, physiotherapists, chiropractors, aroma therapists and acupuncturists. (Everyone I knew swore by their own genius who had brought them back from imminent invalidity; for all of them in London, and further afield, I dutifully removed my trousers and bent over.) I had had more hands on me than Linda Lovelace, and on a few occasions went to bed with packets of frozen Brussels sprouts strapped to my lower back by pyjama cords. But one day, on a routine visit to an acupuncturist who favoured 'the natural way', I was lying on the table with pins in me, imagining I'd been reincarnated, in this life, as a cactus, when I heard odd noises. I twisted my stiff neck to look at him behind me, and opened my eyes wide. My physician was dancing barefoot at the end of the table, with his eyes closed. Not only that, he was waving a joss stick and murmuring an incantation. It was at that moment I decided to go under the knife. But this being on the National Health Service, I was waiting, waiting, for the releasing incision.

And so, when Roger and I got started, I was bad-tempered and more impatient than usual. It is difficult for an adaptor, working on another person's characters and ideas. But if that person is lying on his stomach at your feet, his mind jumbled and wheeling madly, while a secretary treads his aching back, it must be particularly trying. Fortunately Roger Michel was well-organised. He worked out the order of the scenes and the entire structure. As we had decided the serial should last four hours, in hour-long episodes, the most important thing, at that length, was that everything held together. Each episode had to have a shape, as did the whole story. Most of the characters had to be kept going and developed, but new ones had to be introduced too. It was a challenging technical exercise.

Steadfastly, Roger struggled to maintain the novel as it was. I wanted to try adding new material, ideas that had occurred to me since publication. For instance I wanted to develop the relationship between Changez and Jamila, so that he became a sort of Sheherazade. The disciple of Conan Doyle and Harold Robbins would tell stories to maintain his reluctant but beloved wife's attention, enabling him to gaze on her for as long as he could make her listen, hoping that as the tales unfolded, one within another, she would fall in love with him. And perhaps she would. I wanted to see if she could be seduced by his stories of India, a place she'd never been but which determined the nature of her life. After all, some scholars believe that all great stories originate in India, as did the original tales of the Arabian Nights. The framing device, of stories within stories, is considered to be of Indian origin. Already in the novel I had hinted at this development of the Changez/Jamila relationship, but I'd left it at that, in order not to move too far away from Karim. But since I'd finished the book, the characters remained in my mind, they were people I knew well. It would be enjoyable to give them more life.

But we discovered that there wasn't sufficient room for new tangents. Already it was proving difficult enough to get the story as it existed, told in four hours. So most of our work was organisational, plus essential cutting and fiddling around. We had numerous disputes and arguments, but the bulk of the work had already been done, in the novel. We completed the scripts in six weeks.

The most difficult part of casting *The Buddha* was finding someone to play Changez. The dialogue I'd written for him was in strange Anglo-Indian grammar; the sentences ran like mazes. Roger found Harish Patel in Bombay; he was the last actor they saw on that casting trip. I met Harish a few days after he'd set foot for the first time in London. He'd been thinking hard about how Changez talked, walked and used his crippled hand, determined to include his own amazement and confusion at this country, in the part.

The shoot itself was interminable, during a wet and cold winter; the light went early, sometimes at 2.30. We filmed *The Buddha* in the streets where I'd grown up, on the roads where I'd cycled everyday. Naveen Andrews, playing Karim, wore a copy of my school uniform, and sat miserably in a bedroom not unlike the one in which I listened to the John Peel Show on the radio, to drown out the sound of my parents arguing. (Its introduction was a brilliant Jimmy Page guitar break from Led Zeppelin's "Heartbreaker"). This was the room in which, after school, I'd written novels instead of doing my homework. Then I'd pack them up in brown paper and string and carry them to the Post Office where my grandmother worked behind the counter, and send them to publishers in London. (It was never long before they came back, the first chapter a little rumpled, with a printed rejection slip pinned to the front. The pain of that final, impersonal rejection, not of a book, but of one's whole self! Good-bye hope!)

It was the room to which I'd brought my first girlfriends back, after parties, having walked miles home at four in the morning from Peckham or Crystal Palace, shouting out lines from Ginsberg, ("angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night...") after my father brought home the Penguin American Poets collection which also included Corso and Ferlinghetti. Parties: there were plenty. I hung out with a large group of boys who knew one another from school and spent the weekends together, playing records, slitting their wrists, jamming, tripping, having sex, often in the houses of absent parents. Later, the more adventurous remnants of this group, called 'the Bromley contingent' by Johnny Rotten, formed Siouxsie And The Banshees and Generation X. At school they were a group I'd longed to join, just as Karim desperately wants Charlie Hero to be his friend. But they didn't admit just anyone who'd frayed their jeans and dumped their grandfather's tied-up vest in the sink, along with a tin of orange dye. Their sartorial and tonsorial snobbery, along with a freezing coolness, could only have been a version of their parents resistance to the vulgar - in the suburbs the working class were never far away, on the heels of the lower middle-class. I was finally deemed fit to join after I ran away to the Isle of Wight Pop Festival.

In February 1993 I was, fortuitously, invited by an American magazine to interview David Bowie. He'd attended, ten years previously, the school I'd gone to, though he had got out long before us, leading the way so that others, like Charlie Hero, could follow. "I

knew at thirteen,” he said to me, “that I wanted to be the English Elvis.” Throughout the 70s he'd extended English pop music: he'd established “glam rock”, worn dresses and make-up, claimed to be gay, and written clever, knowing songs. He'd introduced people like Lou Reed and Iggy Pop to British audiences and written songs about Andy Warhol and Dylan. His influence on punk was crucial. And he'd made, with Brian Eno, experimental music - Low, Heroes, Lodger - which had lasted, which you could listen to today.

He wasn't merely rich or successful either. I could see he had movie-star glamour, that unbuyable, untouchable sheen which fame, style and a certain self-consciousness bestow on few people. He was, as well, extremely lively and curious, very enthusiastic about movies and books, and in particular, painting and drawing. [At school we'd had the same art teacher, Peter Frampton's father.] Bowie was a man constantly bursting with ideas for musicals, movies, records; he appeared creative all day, drawing, writing on cards, playing music, ringing to ask what you thought of this or that, traveling, meeting people.

I had agreed with Roger that I would ask Bowie to give permission for various old tracks, like 'Changes' and 'Fill Your Heart' to be used on the film. He agreed; emboldened, as we left the restaurant and his black chauffeur-driven car sat there, engine running, I asked if he might fancy writing some original material too. He said yes and asked for the tapes to be sent to him.

A couple of months later Roger and I went to Switzerland to hear what Bowie had done. How could we not feel intimidated? What could schoolboys like us say to the greatest and most famous, who had written over 300 songs, including 'Rebel-Rebel'? (In the pub in Bromley High Street we played his records on the juke-box constantly, kids at different tables suddenly yelling, as one, during conversation “Suffragette City, oh yeah!”) Now we were sitting a few paces from Lake Geneva; yards away, in the other direction, was the house in which Stravinski composed “The Rite of Spring”. And in the studio the familiar pictures of the *The Buddha* ran on the monitor suspended over the mixing desk, which was dotted with dozens of buttons, levers and swinging gauges, alongside which were banked computers. All this, not to launch space ships, but to make sweet music!

At the end we sighed. Relief was palpable. Bowie saw, though, that some of the music altered the mood of the scene. Repeatedly he re-wrote, adjusted cues and thought about how composing music for films is different to writing songs. Later he produced an excellent album called “The Buddha of Suburbia”, developing ideas he'd begun on the film.

They were heady, enjoyable days. The series was, in the end, broadcast as we'd made it. Typically, the BBC did, the day before transmission - although they'd had the tapes for months - attempt to censor it a little, but their nerve held.

Hanif Kureishi, London, April 1994

